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ABSTRACT

This summary report highlights the results of a study that examined the effects of the first phase of a nationwide, multimedia, crime prevention campaign featuring a trench-coated, animated dog named McGruff. Following an introduction explaining the purpose of the two surveys that comprised the study, the eight remaining sections of the report address the following: (1) structural/situational issues, (2) public reactions to the early McGruff campaign, (3) audience self-selection and information seeking, (4) controlling purposive public communications on behalf of crime prevention, (5) guidelines for formulating risk/benefits messages, (6) controlling action demands, (7) considering the communications consumer, and (8) the McGruff campaign. (AEA)

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Media Campaigns and Crime Prevention

An Executive Summary

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James L. Underwood
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I. INTRODUCTION

To a very significant degree, the success of any public communications effort on behalf of crime prevention depends directly on the kinds and amounts of control that communicators can institute and carry out directly vis-a-vis explications of: (1) objectives and goals, (2) themes, (3) appeals, (4) targets, (5) media, and (6) timing of dissemination. The fewer are the components over which communicators can exercise direct control, the more likely will their dependence be on serendipity, random chance, coincidence, and audience self-selection for the achievement of "effects." Under these circumstances "effects" will be difficult to identify; oftentimes they will be inconsistent and even contradictory; and most importantly, such "effects" will be variable rather than singular or monotonic.

Research in mass communication informs us that in those instances where communicator control is neither exclusive nor persistent, we can expect some "effects" to occur in each of three audience "response" domains--in their levels of information; in their beliefs, attitudes and opinions; and in their actions. But to expect substantive changes to occur equally within each response rubric would be quite unrealistic.

In the real world, purposive mass media efforts designed to persuade can be expected to accomplish a good deal in the general areas of raising awareness and interest levels among various publics; somewhat less in the areas of attitude change and motivation; and just a discouragingly limited degree of success in generating recommended action-taking. Still, even with the limited prospects for affecting large-scale behavioral changes, it is essential that control of purposive mass communications on behalf of crime prevention be grounded in as much empiricism as possible. The questions we must ask in assessing a given campaign are multiple: How much awareness did the campaign generate and among whom? How much belief, attitude, and value formation and/or change did it produce and among whom? How much motivation did it stimulate and among whom? How much behavioral change did it induce, and among whom? How much reinforcement did it accomplish, and among whom?

Precisely, these were the questions addressed in the evaluation of the early phases of the McGruff public service advertising campaign.

In this particular evaluation the concern was mainly with finding out what happens when a major nation-wide mass media effort is made on behalf of crime prevention under conditions of minimal control by LEAA regarding the detailed specifics of the targets to be addressed, appeals and messages to be formed and disseminated, and most importantly, with no control whatever over where the advertisements were to be placed or when they would appear.*

*Because federal law prohibits agencies of the government to purchase media space and time, the McGruff campaign had to rely on the voluntary placements of the ads as "public service announcements" (PSAs) in various media across the USA.

A substantial portion of this report then is devoted to evaluating the initial phase McGruff campaign effort, not in order to sit in judgment of its successes or failures; but rather, to learn from this particular undertaking--how to do it even better in the future.

"Doing it even better in the future" requires an aggregate investigative effort that falls under the general rubric of meta-research, a research method that has been receiving increasing attention from mass communications researchers specifically, as well as from social science researchers in general.

The observations of diffusion theorist Everett M. Rogers, in his presidential address to the 1981 conference of the International Communication Association, are particularly important to note:

> An essential activity for any scientific field is to generalize from empirical data to higher levels of abstraction. Every scientist performs a type of such generalization when a theoretical hypothesis is tested with empirical evidence. But a further type of generalization is also necessary for a research field to advance through the systematic accumulation of tested hypotheses: Drawing generalizations, principles, and laws from a number of researches that have been conducted on a particular topic....
>
> Most of us want more than one study to provide confirmatory evidence about a research finding.
>
> Meta research is an essential step in the application of research results to practical problems. (Emphasis ours.) Only rarely can the knowledge provided by a single study lead directly to solving some social problem; even in such a rare case, we would wish to compare the results from our single study with the conclusions from other previous researches, so as to better judge their truth claims.

Clearly, if future mass media efforts on behalf of crime prevention are to come under increasing communicator controls that are to be empirically based, they must rely on more than a single study for guidance.

As a consequence, for guidance in this particular investigation we have turned mainly to the literatures on salient aspects of public behavior vis-a-vis crime and its prevention as well as to the literature on the effects of purposive mass communications on behalf of self-protection plus analogous efforts in social amelioration such as health. Abetting the findings from these secondary sources are our own primary data, principally data regarding certain effects of the initial McGruff campaign.

The focus of this research has been on those crime prevention messages that are disseminated via the mass media for the principal purpose of persuading message recipients to take the actions advocated.

Excluded from consideration in this study were crime prevention messages that are exchanged privately; didactic messages that are designed mainly for formal instructional activities; and advertising messages that are designed to sell products such as burglar alarms, door and window locks, firearms and such. Additionally, technical reports, straight news and commentary, and fiction and drama which may touch on crime prevention were excluded as well.

In this report a number of problems and issues are raised--problems and issues that from our primary and secondary source research appear to call for particular attention at this time. Undoubtedly, there will be additional issues and problems that the reader will recognize as important--ones which the authors have either downplayed or neglected to acknowledge at all. Just as no one media campaign can possibly accomplish all the communications objectives that can be considered ideal, no one research effort can possibly contend with all the pertinent issues and problems that are inherent in the outcomes of that research.

The University of Denver study addressed five major issues and problems:

1. What structural/situational issues must any public communication crime prevention effort accept as "givens"?

2. What happens when various publics with varying experiences are directed to take specifically advocated "crime prevention" actions?

   How is crime prevention action-taking related to and/or influenced by:

   a. Demographic characteristics;

   b. The nature of the advocated actions;

   c. Beliefs regarding responsibility for crime prevention; beliefs about self-competence; beliefs regarding the efficacy of individual action-taking in reducing victimization;

   d. Victimization experience and perception of vulnerability;

   e. Information about and interest in crime and crime prevention;

   f. Opinion leadership and participation in community organizations.

3. What happens when crime prevention advertisements are produced and disseminated exclusively as "public service advertisements"--PSAs? What are PSAs, what are their functions; who are their audiences; what are their effects? What are the strengths of PSAs; their weaknesses?

4. What were citizens' reactions to the initial Ridgeliff campaign?

   a. Who was exposed to it?

   b. What effects did those who did exposure to Ridgeliff advertisements appear to generate [illegible] changes in:

      1. Awareness and information gain

      2. Attitude-[illegible] change

      3. Action-taking

5. Other than the placement and timing of advertisements, what additional components of public communication should [illegible] managers be aware of?

   a. Delineating types or attributes other than demographic characteristics

   b. Risk-efficacy [illegible] and action-taking information and action-taking.

   c. Fear appeals.

   d. Source credibility

The present report features [illegible] of theories, principles, hypotheses, and data that touch on the [illegible] issues and problems along with suggestions for the possible resolution.

III. STRUCTURAL/SITUATIONAL ISSUES: THE MATTER OF CONTEXT

Rightfully so, the early "McGruff" crime prevention campaign, as were a previous number of similar efforts, was based overall on demands that audiences take specifically suggested crime prevention actions on their own. Synoptically, the slogan, "Take a Bite Out of Crime" was used in "McGruff" to persuade message recipients to engage in some sixty different behaviors that ostensibly would either reduce or eliminate the threat of crime victimization.[9] One cannot foresee sizable crime prevention media campaigns of the future to be anything but action-demanding in their thrust. However, consideration must be given to the numbers of demands to be made as well as to the nature of the demands themselves.

The manifest "logic" behind these particular types of action demands is simple enough:

Many "street crimes" can be prevented. The state cannot be totally responsible for the prevention of all crimes. The individual citizen must take on the responsibility of protecting himself/herself, his and her loved ones, and his and her property. One can accomplish such protection by (1) becoming better informed about crime prevention and (2) by carrying out the specific actions that "authorities" advocate.

It turns out that the latent logic of this kind of syllogism is extremely complex, and in this complexity lies a veritable mine field that is peppered by structural, situational, and psychological barriers that can hamper, derail and even neutralize the manifest argument to the point of virtual ineffectiveness.

For example, some publics do not believe it is the responsibility of the individual to "prevent crimes"; others who may actually believe in the doctrine of citizen responsibility nonetheless may not believe that they as individuals are capable of carrying out the actions that are advocated; others still may find that from their personal situations and perspectives the suggested actions they encounter cannot possibly deliver the promised results.

At another level, some publics already have developed the habit of performing the actions advocated, and they find any more demands to do so to be redundant "nagging"; others find the "information" presented to them to be "uninteresting," for they see little or no relation between getting the information and doing something about it; and still others find the same information adding to their confusion and anxieties rather than alleviating them.

---

[9]Audiences for the original McGruff PSAs who requested "further information," received an attractive book of "tips" in the form of 60 separate imperatives or demands.

[illegible] this is not to say that certain self-selected message recipients may find the crime prevention information they happen to encounter occasionally to be reasonable and useful and at times, even appalling to action.

III. PUBLIC REACTIONS TO THE EARLY McGRUFF CAMPAIGN

For primary "confirmatory" data as a check on the secondary research that was done, a study of public reactions to the first phases of the McGruff campaign was conducted by the University of Denver.

The early McGruff PSAs featured (and still do) a trench-coated cartoon dog character who offered a wide variety of "hints" regarding actions to take to avoid being victimized by street crimes. The campaign was launched during autumn of 1979 and has received considerable play in the nation's media since. The Denver study covers the campaign's first four-month phase, based almost completely on public service advertisements running as television and radio spots and newspaper and magazine display ads. In brief, the PSAs in one form or another depicted the McGruff character urging citizens to help "Take a Bite Out of Crime" by doing such things as locking doors and windows, keeping a watch on their neighborhoods, contacting the police about suspicious-looking strangers and the like.

Two separate surveys were used both to evaluate the impact of the first stage of the McGruff public service advertising campaign and to gather additional appropriate information concerning crime prevention behavior. One survey, conducted approximately four months after the start of the campaign, was based on personal interviews with a national probability sample of 1,500 adults. This survey was primarily designed to describe the scope of public exposure to the campaign and reactions of various groups to it. The second survey entailed use of a two-wave panel design with a smaller and less generalizable sample, with interviews being conducted both immediately prior to and several months after the campaign's onset. The "before"-"after" panel survey consisted of personal interviews conducted with an initial probability sample of 2,358 persons over age 17 drawn proportionately from three U.S. metropolitan areas. The main goal of the panel study was to obtain more objective and exacting measures of campaign exposure patterns and effects under at least a somewhat controlled situation.

Because communicators were unable to control either the placement or the timing of the initial McGruff advertisements they were unable to control exposure to those particular communications. The consequence of this particular fact can be a serious inability to control "effects."

When communication control over exposure is missing, we cannot expect precision in either targeting, exposure or effects. To a serious degree then, self-selection on the part of message recipients takes over here in governing both audience exposure and reactions. Consequently, we would expect that reactions to McGruff would be more or less "all over the lot."

A. Exposure to the Initial McGruff Campaign

- Overall, 30% of the national sample claimed they either had seen or heard McGruff public service advertisements in the beginning of the campaign.

[illegible]

5. Specific on the topic.

6. Trustworthy in that they accept and defend the validity of their own assertions.

7. Attractive to and empathetic with us.

For these reasons we are most apt to consider familiar sources that are similar to ourselves as credible rather than unfamiliar "outside" experts and "authorities."

II. Controlling Risk Perceptions

From a very important perspective, a challenging task before the crime prevention communicator is to attempt to create congruence between targets' subjective estimates of the risks of being victimized and the actual risks that obtain in various circumstances--calculated, more or less, as reliable "objective" measures.

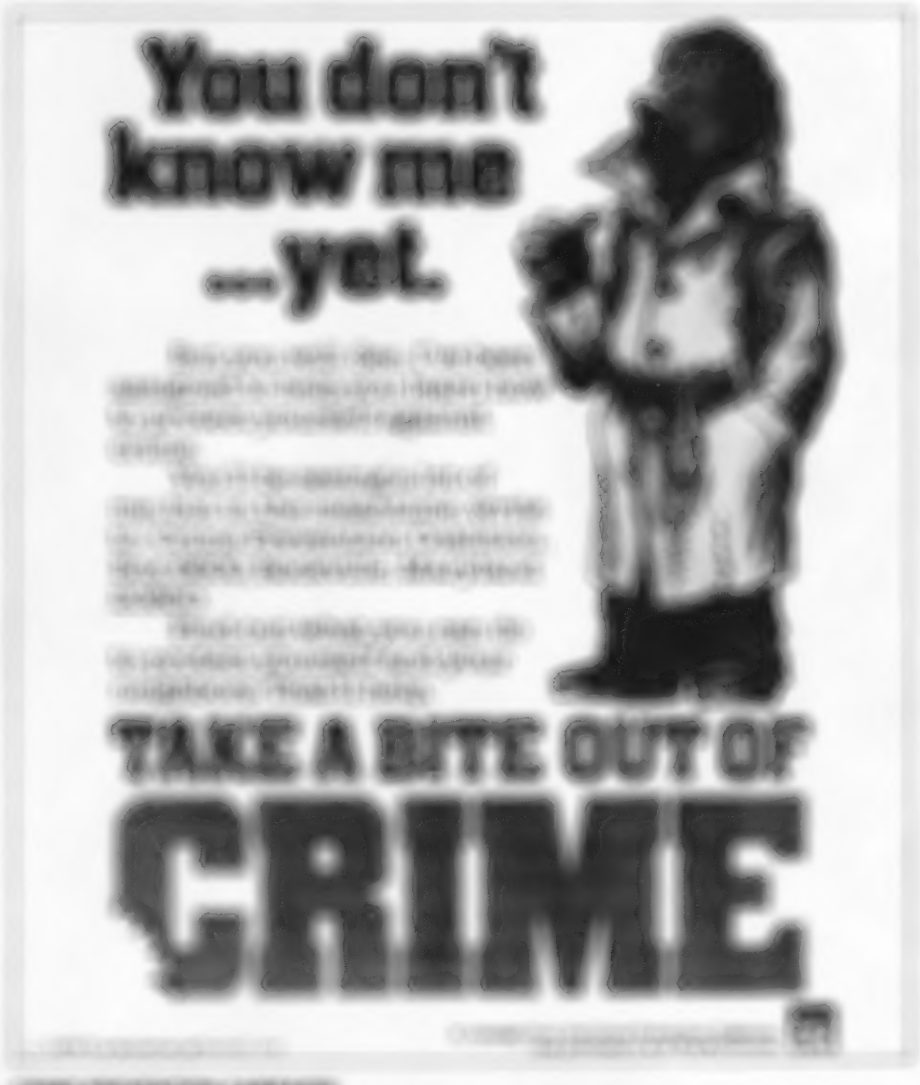
For the college-educated communities minority of targets who are trained to deal with abstract "risk probabilities," actuarial evidence in mathematical statistical terms may be sufficient. For the majority of Americans in any target group who lack such education, the presentation of such actuarial evidence may only be confusing and uncertainty-provoking.

An illustration consider the following:

The older each of us become, the more "careful" we become; the fewer the risk-taking behaviors we engage in, and the greater the avoidance actions we take. The futility many of us often depend on "fate" or on the "divine" to intervene and reduce any dangers, threats and risks--a task that the institutional system seemingly is unable to accomplish.

Clearly, communicators will have a tough job on their hands in trying to convince many publics who believe quite seriously that luck and divine intervention will keep them secure, convince them that, in fact, they may be in considerable danger...danger that requires "rational human" intervention if it is to be avoided, diminished or eliminated.

Perhaps information given in forms other than sheer exposition--forms that are narrative, dramatic, or even humorous--might be important to pursue for such targets. Recall is an excellent example of the ability of these communicatively formats to reach less well-educated, unsophisticated sub-populations.


You don't know me ...yet.
TAKE A BITE OUT OF CRIME.